



# Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

The Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS) is part of the Uniformed Services University's Department of Psychiatry, located in Bethesda, Maryland, and a partnering center of the Defense Center of Excellence (DCoE) for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury.

## Restoring a Sense of Safety in the Aftermath of a Disaster: Tips for Parents and Professionals

In the aftermath of a disaster, our children are exposed to environments and events that are well outside their normal experience. Many children, those living in close proximity to the event, and those who will learn about the event through television, social media, or newspaper coverage, will be affected and upset. Adults will have to attend to many responsibilities, including the responsibility on parents and professionals who interact with children to provide a sense of safety and communication around this event.

### Communicate effectively with your children

A high profile event of this magnitude can result in confusion and distress among communities across the country. Distress can result in distortion about the facts of the event. Therefore, special attention should be given when communicating with children and adolescents.

- When speaking with your children, it is best to use communication that is factual, simple, clear and sensitively worded.
- Don't overwhelm young children with too much information. They might want to talk intermittently or might need concrete information to be repeated.
- Use language that is appropriate to your child's age.
- Young children sometimes exhibit "magical thinking" which might lead them to believe they are responsible for what happened.
- Children may have ideas or beliefs that are difficult to know unless you ask them.
- Adults can encourage children to talk, but should respect their wishes when they may not want to.
- Ensure that your children are not exposed to media reports about the event that are repetitive, confusing, or frightening.

### Physical safety and security always take priority

It is difficult to predict children's reactions to learning about these types of events and whether their immediate reactions will lead to sustained psychological problems.

- Common posttraumatic responses in children include: nightmares or fears related to the trauma, avoidance of reminders of the trauma, and repetitive play that mimics the trauma.

- While symptoms are often transient, they should be clinically treated if they persist. If you have questions contact your child's health care or behavioral health care provider to seek advice or guidance.

- Some children may act out as a reaction. Talk to your child about what is troubling them and do not punish or reprimand them.

### Answers to some common questions

Below are some common questions and answers to help guide caregivers addressing disasters with children and adolescents:

#### *Is it okay for my child to go to school/ extracurricular activities/play with friends?*

Parents need to make decisions about return to normal activities based upon an assessment of risk. Most disasters are single, rare and non-repetitive. Children respond best when their lives are minimally disrupted. For this reason it is important for children to continue their daily routines as soon as reasonably possible. In the less likely circumstance where a continued or lingering risk is present, parents are advised to keep informed about new developments related to the event and heed the advice of local authorities about how to proceed with daily activities.

#### *Why do these things happen?*

Children, like adults, often want a reason for how and why a disaster occurred. Unfortunately, we usually can't adequately explain all the factors that led to the disaster, nor can we or should we blame people for the disaster. It does not help children to have them fear groups of people or "Mother Nature." More importantly, help your children understand that adults, including government authorities, work hard to identify and stop dangerous events before they even happen.

#### *Will this happen again and how do I keep my children safe?*

Unfortunately, disasters, both natural and man-made, are likely to occur in the future. It is important to remember that despite our awareness, disasters occur

rarely and do not occur to most communities. Remember that parents and professionals strive to keep our children, safe yet allow them the space they need to grow and develop. Use the following guidelines:

- know your children's whereabouts, who they are with and when they are to return home
- set clear and consistent curfews
- have a clear method of communication in normal and emergency situations (e.g. cell phone)
- educate them about places or situations that are more likely to put them in danger and teach them to avoid high-risk exposures
- monitor federal and local advise about risks that might surface
- be vigilant about safety in your community
- strive to keep open communication with children and adolescents

### *How does one plan for this type of emergency?*

Discuss hypothetical emergency situations with your children and calmly talk with them about what they can do to keep themselves safe when danger presents itself.

Instruct them to trust and seek help from police and other authorities who are likely to be on the scene quickly. Always encourage your children to say something when they see something potentially unsafe for other children or for adults. Establishing a communication plan for locating family members can help to reduce anxiety. Parents should

know where their children are and children should tell parents when they have changed their location.

### *Is my child okay?*

Children will show a wide variety of reactions. There is no "normal" reaction to stressful events. Some reactions include tearfulness, separation or bedtime anxiety, or regression in behaviors. More severe reactions may include reliving the traumatic event through dreams, emotional numbness, increased startle responses, withdrawal or physical symptoms like racing heartbeat, nausea or change in appetite. These types of events, while tragic, can sometimes lead to positive opportunities. They become opportunities to open, or reopen, channels of communication among family members. They may provide us opportunities to appreciate each other more and to express our love for one another. They may provide opportunities for families to better plan how they will cope with future difficult times or topics. It is important to focus on what might positively emerge from these tragic events while we also acknowledge tragic losses.

### Online Resources

If you have any questions about your child's health or response to a traumatic event you can seek professional advice from a community primary care or behavioral care provider or review additional resources at the following sites:

Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress  
National Child Traumatic Stress Network  
American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry  
American Academy of Pediatrics  
American Psychiatric Association  
American Psychological Association  
American Red Cross

[www.cstsonline.org](http://www.cstsonline.org)  
[www.ncstn.org](http://www.ncstn.org)  
[www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)  
[www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)  
[www.psych.org](http://www.psych.org)  
[www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)  
[www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org)



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